United Nations A/56/176

General Assembly

Distr.: General
13 July 2001

Original: English

Fifty-sixth session
Items 44 and 102 of the preliminary list*
Multilingualism
Questions related to information

Letter dated 18 June 2001 from the Secretary-General to the Permanent Representatives of Andorra, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Uruguay and Venezuela to the United Nations

Note by the Secretariat

By a letter addressed to the Secretary-General on 11 June 2001, the Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations requested that a letter addressed to the Secretary-General on 11 April 2001 by twenty Permanent Representatives of Spanish-speaking Member States, concerning the use of the Spanish language in United Nations public information documents and the promotion of a multilingual philosophy in the Organization's activities, should be circulated as a document of the General Assembly.

The letter from the Permanent Representative of Mexico was circulated as document A/56/93, under items 44, Multilingualism, and 102, Questions related to information, of the preliminary list of items to be included in the provisional agenda of the fifty-sixth regular session of the General Assembly. It contained as an annex the letter from the twenty Permanent Representatives of Spanish-speaking Member States referred to above.

The Secretary-General had replied to the letter of the twenty Permanent Representatives on 18 June 2001, after carefully considering the points raised therein regarding a balanced use of the official languages of the Organization, in particular in the field of public information, and specifically the availability of information in Spanish.

The Secretary-General's reply to the Permanent Representatives of Andorra, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Uruguay and Venezuela is reproduced in the annex to the present document.

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Annex

[Original: Spanish]

18 June 2001

I have the honour to respond to your letter of 11 April 2001, in which you emphasized the need to achieve linguistic balance in the published outputs of the Organization. I note that your concerns centred particularly on the use of Spanish and other official languages on the United Nations web site, as well as in press releases and other public information materials. The Interim Head of the Department of Public Information has already sought to address some of these concerns during the recent session of the Committee on Information, but I wish to assure you of my personal attention to the important issues you raise.

In the first instance, I wish to assure you of my personal commitment to a multilingual approach to information dissemination in this most global and diverse of all international organizations. Nevertheless, as we are all aware, for material to be distributed in the six official languages, it must first be created in these languages. This creation, despite advances in technology, remains a highly labour-intensive and therefore costly process. In the case of official documents, the budget, the staffing and the recruitment procedures for production in six languages have long been in place, and thus these texts already exist in multilingual versions. Once the new, re-engineered Official Documents System (ODS) is functional later this year, this material will be presented on the web with a fast and user-friendly interface, including the facility to search both full text and subject descriptors in all six languages. The extent and conditions of its public accessibility are, of course, matters for the General Assembly to decide.

On the other hand, I cannot but state candidly that the creation in six languages of public information and other materials that have hitherto been budgeted and staffed for production in one or two languages, whether in print or on the web, is more problematic. The full availability of these outputs in all official languages would require an infusion of substantial additional resources and/or a substantial reduction in other mandates of the Secretariat, neither of which the General Assembly has authorized. Nevertheless, I am pleased to report on a number of initiatives designed to improve the linguistic balance of the Organization's published output within existing resources.

In the first instance, the Organization is attempting to broaden the cadre of creators of web sites in official languages, notably Spanish, through its training programmes. For example, the Department of Public Information (DPI) recently conducted a seminar on web site creation in Spanish for 35 representatives of 19 Member States where Spanish is the official language. While this course, which was very well received, was aimed at assisting delegates in creating sites for their own missions, participants were also introduced to the resources available in Spanish on the United Nations web site. DPI plans to organize similar courses in the future.

In general, most United Nations information centres are active in creating web sites in local languages, both official and non-official (such as Portuguese), in order to reach out more effectively to civil society in Member States. These sites are all accessible through the United Nations web site. In addition, United Nations information centres in Spanish-speaking countries produce a wide range of

information material in Spanish locally. The Organization is also actively soliciting assistance from universities, on a cost-free basis, to provide high quality gratis translations of United Nations web site content.

Member States, as well, have offered substantive assistance to the Organization in this regard, through the Associate Expert Programme. Since October 2000, the Department of Public Information has been fortunate to have an Associate Expert, funded by the Government of Spain, working to enhance the United Nations web site in Spanish. Similarly, the Organisation de la Francophonie has provided the services of an Associate Expert for the French web site since April 2000. I should like to invite other interested Member States to follow suit, either by funding posts for Associate Experts and Junior Professional Officers or by identifying institutions within your own country willing to provide gratis translations of United Nations web pages into the various official languages.

I wish also to inform Member States that, to ensure a consistent approach to the question of multilingualism in the Secretariat, an interdepartmental group has been formed under the leadership of a Coordinator for Multilingualism at the Assistant Secretary-General level.

In closing, I wish to reiterate that, though I believe that full parity is unachievable within existing budgetary constraints, I attach great importance to improving the linguistic balance among the official languages of the United Nations, and to doing so in a cost-effective manner. I am confident that through creative collaboration between United Nations offices and the Governments of Member States, we will progress together towards realization of this important goal.

(*Signed*) Kofi A. **Annan**